LOUIS VUITION PARIS

Oh, it's such a perfectly scruffy tagline — the bad boy of fashion — that Marc Jacobs has been stuck with for almost as long as Sally Field has had to listen to people do their "You really like me!" imitation. All right, enough already. Not because Jacobs has gone from naughty to nicely serious. That's sweet but immaterial. What does matter is that Jacobs has grown up to become one of the most influential designers of his generation, responsible for three major collections that are all related by a deliberate, almost gleefully consistent inconsistency that renders each line distinctive. His work for each gets analyzed, idolized or plagiarized by an industry that firmly believes he has a near-psychic prescience as to what people on both sides of the Atlantic want to wear. But for all the visionary dominance exerted by both his signature line and his Marc by Marc Jacobs diffusion line on an eager-to-think-young-and-restlessly-oriented world, it's Jacobs's position as creative director of Louis Vuitton that proves he is no longer on the career path of a boy — bad or good — but of a man eager to prove every day that change can be a good thing.

While lovers of luxury can recognize the mocha-on-brown Louis Vuitton initials more readily than their spouse's handwriting, Jacobs, with several bold strokes — including a breezy, just short of kinky, attitude toward luxe sportswear, and a few cheeky but inspired collaborations with other artists — has injected this paramount travel company with a global, cross-generational appeal that has people auctioning their spots on waiting lists for back-ordered Vuitton bags on Ebay.

Jacobs tries hard not to blush, but even a former downtown-after-dark fixture who now craves and savors the newfound calm he finds in making lemonade in his Paris garden has to smile at such frenzy while admitting that there is no secret to predicting obsessive desire. "Maybe it has something to do with Vuitton's long-standing dedication to, and my growing appreciation of, detail," he says. "My own personal approach is more naïve, more devoted to whatever clever thing you can whip up on a sewing machine. Detail at Vuitton, though, is fundamental. Craftsmanship is specialized whether the end product is a bathing suit or knitwear. Elements of couture are expected, and it's these elements that give our clothes and accessories a polished, ladylike feel. Production in Paris may not be up to the speed we are used to in the States, but the quality is amazing."

Jacobs acknowledges it is impossible to conceive of one collection as separate from the others or to maintain two personae. "Things start to overlap, and I'm liking that," he says. "My own lines have always benefited from a kind of reverse status appeal that comes from wearing clothes thought to be underground, unknown or hip. On the other hand, by playing with the iconography of Vuitton, we've found that luxury can be wonderful and more approachable when it's not in your face and it's devoid of the 'precious' factor. When it feels new without screaming 'new.' And what has happened, as I travel back and forth between New York and Paris for each collection, is that I've discovered as many similarities as there are differences in these strategies. I no longer think it's impossible to have clothes that possess a certain irreverence and yet are still so beautifully made that they become highly desirable."

There are probably more women who desire than can afford the enviable chic of a jacket that boasts seams piped in satin that can be seen through the chiffon lining. But that's why Jacobs devotes the same attention to something as basic as a Vuitton wallet. "I really do get off on all we put into it," he says. "And I have to admit, I get off on all the appreciation we've gotten from new customers as well as older artists and Parisians who were around to buy couture in the sixties. I know how hard it is to get their approval. It means that not only have I learned something here, but that it shows."